

Outlook

WEST VANCOUVER

Picking up the pieces

How a North Shore couple is trying to
rebuild the lives of rape victims in the
Democratic Republic of Congo —
and why they're asking for your help.

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LAND CONTROL

Squamish Nation members
set to vote on who will
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AT THE HELM

For nearly a quarter century,
West Vancouver resident
Bruce Falkins has been saving
lives on the ocean

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On the water

**West Van resident
Bruce Falkins honoured
for 24 years of
volunteering with the
auxiliary coast guard**

Everybody has a favourite place. For Bruce Falkins it happens to be the same spot where he battles to save lives.

There's nothing like being out on the water, tiller in hand and a soft breeze at one's back, the West Vancouver resident explains. But the sea's also fierce; its power can quickly turn on you. Falkins has seen it all.

He's volunteered with the North Shore's Coast Guard Auxiliary for 24 of its 29-year existence. He also heads the North Shore Lifeboat Society. This month, Falkins received the highest honour presented by Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Canadian Coast Guard – the Commissioner's Commendation – for his work.

He's no stranger to volunteering; he used to lend his time to the West Vancouver Fire Department, back when it had a volunteer branch. Falkins is also no foreigner to the ocean. When he was six years old his parents signed him up for sailing lessons at Hollyburn Sailing Club. Falkins' first job, at the age of 16, was cleaning charter yachts. By the time he was 19, Falkins bought his first sailboat – a 26-foot Thunderbird. Today he runs a water taxi – the Apadaca.

Falkins' interest in the auxiliary coast guard started while working at the Esso float in Fisherman's Cove.

Every week he'd watch the team of volunteers head out for training or speed off on calls. Falkins wanted to be a part of it.

Since he joined the auxiliary, Falkins has been involved in more than 500 rescues. He's also learnt a thing or two about local weather.

"It is one of the reasons I never laugh anymore when people say we're going out in 100 knots of wind," Falkins says, noting that at times there will be no wind off Eagle Harbour yet around the corner in Howe Sound it's blowing a gale.

Falkins recalls one rescue of a boater who got in trouble while making the crossing from Snug Cove, Bowen Island, to Eagle Harbour. The boater decided to make the trip to the calmer mooring, but the power was out in West Van and the sailor became disoriented. He found himself caught in 80-knot (148 kilometre an hour) winds, let off a flare and Falkins and his team was sent to find him.

"The tips of the waves were blowing off and, as the spray came off, it froze into flying bits of ice," Falkins says.

Unable to look into the wind, Falkins was forced to search downwind in a zigzag pattern. The gale was so loud, the crew couldn't hear each other when yelling only a few feet apart.

Finally they saw lights on the water. But it took Falkins a second to figure out what they were, as the sailboat was rolling so drastically that the lights on the boat's spreader, which extends out near the top of the mast, were dipping almost parallel to the water. The grateful sailor and his boat were towed back to safety.

The auxiliary's missions don't all have such happy endings. Over the past 20 years, Falkins

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once received a call about a boat up on the rocks. When he arrived, he saw three guys fishing on the shoreline with their vessel on land 20 or so feet away from the water. When Falkins asked why it was where it was, the guy said he was excited to be fishing in the Pacific as he was from Edmonton, but couldn't understand why the rocks were moving up.

"Apparently he'd only fished in lakes and didn't know about tides," Falkins says.

Although maybe not as inexperienced with the sea as the Edmontonian, Vancouverites typically aren't knowledgeable about the marine environment, Falkins says. Maybe it's because Lower Mainland residents are around the ocean so much, they don't see the risks it can pose.

There are more people venturing out on the water, he says. During the time Falkins has served with the coast guard, he's seen a decrease in the number of people fishing and an increase in activities such as kayaking, canoeing, windsurfing and other water sports. This is changing the dynamics of the coast guard's job. For example, paddling against waves and wind is a lot more difficult than motoring.

"An issue from our perspective are the crafts are not as robust," Falkins adds.

Currently there are 28 active members out of the Howe Sound coast guard auxiliary station. There are 46 auxiliary stations throughout B.C., the newest of which opened in Squamish last year.

This year, the Howe Sound unit, located at Fisherman's Cove, is one of seven units getting a new boat. The new boat will be a bit longer, so it will be easier to perform CPR on its deck and

will replace the Howe Sound unit's 25-year-old vessel. Falkins helped design the new boats. "They are naming the boat class after me," Falkins says. And he can't wait to get out on the water in it.

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"You gain an appreciation for how quickly things can go wrong," Bruce Falkins says of what his many years with the auxiliary coast guard have taught him. A new boat class is being named after Falkins in his honour. Rebecca Aldous photo

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